

STRATEGIC PLAN

FEBRUARY 2001



LEGAL AID FOUNDATION OF LOS ANGELES

***WORKING FOR JUSTICE IN OUR COMMUNITIES
SINCE 1929***

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INTRODUCTION

Our strategic plan outlines the goals and strategies the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles will pursue to more effectively change the conditions that cause or aggravate poverty. It is based on an assessment of community needs, calls for increased community collaborations, and is intended to result in greater community impact. Our strategic plan is firmly rooted in the firm's mission and core values.

OUR PLANNING PROCESS

Our objective is to make LAFLA the best law firm for the poor. The planning process has helped identify ways the firm should structure and organize its work to meet client needs.

Our strategic planning process developed ideas and plans for fostering constructive change in the firm and sought to build mechanisms to improve flexibility and resourcefulness.

The strategic planning process was initiated by the Board of Directors and has involved staff from every office, every unit, and every practice specialty. Guided by the Strategic Planning Committee, the process involved setting goals and objectives and identifying methods for achieving them. A strategic plan is vital for Legal Aid to fulfill its mission to low-income clients and communities.

METHODOLOGY

Our strategic planning committee was formed with representatives from the entire firm. The committee identified the key components of the strategic plan, and then conducted a series of staff surveys to better understand staff views.

The strategic planning committee then conducted an all-staff process to examine the issues affecting poor residents of Los Angeles and agree upon how the firm would meet these needs.

Legal Aid staff and advocates hosted a series of theme meetings where a wide range of community experts examined existing and emerging issues. Staff then held critical thinking sessions to better understand the effectiveness of the firm's work in meeting these needs, and to propose improvements and new methods to ensure the firm can have maximum impact on these problems.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA) is the frontline law firm for low-income people in Los Angeles. LAFLA is committed to promoting access to justice, strengthening communities, combating discrimination and effecting systemic change through representation, advocacy, and community education

VALUES

Justice. Justice must be equal. We fight poverty, discrimination, and other barriers to justice.

Dignity. Dignity is the right of everyone. We are respectful, compassionate, and accountable toward the communities we serve.

Results. Actions and results are what count. We act on our beliefs. We improve lives and strengthen communities with dedication and professionalism.

Client driven. Client needs drive our work. The needs of low-income communities define and inspire what we do.

OBJECTIVES

From the outset, the Strategic Planning Committee identified ambitious goals:

- ✓ Improve access to legal services for clients.
- ✓ Improve client services.
- ✓ Improve advocacy skills.
- ✓ Improve management and supervision.
- ✓ Improve internal functioning.
- ✓ Enhance LAFLA's image in the community.
- ✓ Develop and utilize better evaluation mechanisms.
- ✓ Boost morale in the firm and maximize staff participation in the process of change.

PLAN COMPONENTS

The Strategic Planning Committee identified the key issues to be addressed in order to achieve our objectives early in the planning process. The committee conducted a preliminary assessment of the firm's strengths and weaknesses and addressed ways we could improve.

The committee agreed that the following components were central to a strategic plan: (1) client services, (2) access to services, (3) staff skill development, (4) management and supervision, (5) evaluation, and (6) staff participation in the process of change.

The committee with the participation of all LAFLA staff developed goals and strategies to change and improve the work of the firm. A discussion of each with the status of implementation follows.

ACCESS TO LEGAL SERVICES

As a leading law firm for low-income communities, we play a unique role in the greater network of advocates for equal justice. We represent those who need immediate assistance to avoid homelessness, loss of jobs and income, family break-up, and other problems. We also represent the many poor and low-income Angelenos who, on a daily basis, face systemic barriers to equal justice, equal opportunity, and, too often, basic human rights.

Access must not be restricted based on geography, language, disability, or other factor unrelated to the nature of the legal problem. We believe providing access to legal services cannot be addressed in a passive manner. It is not simply having an open door. We believe it is critical to understand clients' fundamental needs and provide useful information to the client community. Our scarce resources must be devoted to the most meritorious cases involving serious issues. We must provide access to the community that is both efficient and relevant to the needs of clients.

Goal: Make LAFLA more accessible to clients at office sites and in the community.

Strategies

- ✓ Improve access by strengthening internal collaboration.
- ✓ Evaluate and improve phone and voicemail system for ease and accessibility to clients.
- ✓ Expand access via outreach, collaboration, and community education.

Status of Implementation

During FY 2000 a study of the voicemail system produced a report outlining errors and omissions in the current system and identifying major design and policy issues including: the need for consistency in the point of entry, agreement upon the appropriate level of substantive law information, and the need to address multiple language issues. Client board members have identified this as a serious priority problem. A concerted effort by many parts of the firm will be needed to address this.

We will achieve these objectives using a wide array of strategies including cross-issue taskforces, firm-wide protocols for case acceptance, firm-wide meetings of receptionists and screeners, and the creation of a website.

A website for the firm is scheduled for launch in late April.

Units have submitted protocols and checklists for intake. Receptionists and screeners have begun their schedule of regular meetings and will begin procedures comparing and sharing resource and referral lists and pro per and handout materials.

EMPLOYEE SKILL DEVELOPMENT

In order to serve clients better and strengthen Legal Aid, we are committed to a strong program of staff and professional development. Making continual learning a reality requires time, thought and action. It requires that the entire organization, all supervisors, and each staff member engage in this process together, and take collective responsibility for development.

Goal: Improve advocacy and advocacy-support skills of all LAFLA staff.

Strategies

- ✓ Make staff development a top priority of the firm.
- ✓ Adopt explicit performance standards and develop appropriate training resources.
- ✓ Develop and implement firm-wide orientations.
- ✓ Identify needed skills for all staff.
- ✓ Create a training officer position and establish a central clearinghouse of training resources and opportunities.
- ✓ Use individual development plans as a tool for planning and monitoring progress.
- ✓ Require participation in policy and impact projects and taskforces.
- ✓ Encourage mentoring relationships within and outside the firm.
- ✓ Create ways to ensure ongoing feedback.

Status of Implementation

Detailed performance standards have been developed for most job classifications. Meetings within job categories to review staff development needs and to promote the use of individual development plans continue. A joint strategic planning/management committee is working on implementing this component of the strategic plan. A Director of Advocacy and Training has been appointed.

Training on supervision for all supervisors and senior attorneys has taken place, with a commitment to more. All supervisors have been briefed on the importance of more conscientious attention to timely and thorough evaluations.

MANAGEMENT AND SUPERVISION

In the all-staff surveys, important feedback was generated on the importance of improving the firm's management and supervision. The proposals generated are a direct outcome of that staff input and reflect practical recommendations to deal with priority concerns in this area.

Goal: Build effective leadership throughout LAFLA's management.

Strategies

- ✓ Fill critical management positions, including Deputy Director.
- ✓ Identify and prioritize the duties of Directing Attorneys.
- ✓ Train managers and staff on new performance standards.
- ✓ Establish mechanisms for regular training and evaluation of managers.
- ✓ Emphasize staff development as a priority for managers.
- ✓ Standardize and implement a consistent hiring process.
- ✓ Address the disparity in the status of Temporary/Grant positions.

Status of Implementation

We have filled key management positions and conducted training in supervisory skills. This type of training will be provided periodically and as the training needs of supervisors are identified. Office managers will participate in a training regarding performance standards and development planning in March, 2001. Training on the new performance standards is currently underway with all staff.

EVALUATION

Legal Aid must ensure accountability from all staff and in every aspect of its work. We must have consistent, thorough assessments of how we do our work and what we achieve for our clients and their communities.

Our mission is ambitious, but our resources are limited. Success will largely be determined by our willingness to critique, discard, make changes, and improve in every aspect of our work.

Goal: Continual growth, learning, and improvement.

Strategies

- ✓ Develop effective evaluation tools.
- ✓ Design measurement tools to capture outcomes.
- ✓ Measure outcomes in a regular, timely fashion.
- ✓ Ensure all aspects of the firm's work are regularly evaluated.
- ✓ Use innovative methods of gaining community assessment and input.

Status of Implementation

The firm has completed a one-year process during which we obtained rich and varied input from a range of community advocates, and held a series of internal discussions about ways to build a more flexible and resourceful law firm.

New performance evaluations have been completed, staff are in the process of understanding the standards, and managers are in the process of implementing them with evaluations for all staff.

PARTICIPATION OF STAFF

We believe it is critical to involve all staff in the change process. The strategic planning process incorporated this approach in every aspect, and the plans that have emerged reflect this value.

Goal: Maximize participation of all staff in the change process.

Strategies

- ✓ Identify areas of change.
- ✓ Identify ways that staff can participate in the changes.
- ✓ Identify reasons staff may not participate.
- ✓ Identify and implement solutions to counteract poor participation.
- ✓ Create the time for staff to plan and participate.

Status of Implementation

Some important strategies for maximizing staff input have been identified including participation in taskforces and outreach teams by all advocates, regular meetings of receptionists and screeners, and the creation of individual development plan. These strategies are being tried in the strategic planning process with encouraging results.

CLIENT SERVICES

To assess the effectiveness of our substantive work and client services the strategic planning committee held a series of discussions with outside experts and community leaders knowledgeable about the needs of low-income Angelenos and LAFLA staff. These discussions focused on the broad themes: *Preserve Safety, Stability and Health; Protect and Create Economic Opportunities; and Protect Human and Civil Rights*. Some thirty-three (33) community organizers, advocates, academics, and representatives from the private sector and government participated in these discussions. We gained valuable new information, while engaging in spirited and critical discussion with the experts.

We learned a great deal through the rich, challenging discussions, most significantly: the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles is important to the community. We play an important role in addressing the needs of the communities we serve. Yet there are many community needs we do not address. We need to build on the strengths of our specialty law units to be able to address emerging and cross-over client needs. We will have to do less of some types of work to be able to handle issues that are more important, urgent, or systemic. We need to expand external and internal collaboration. As individuals and as a firm, we must increase our mastery of techniques of advocacy and knowledge of substantive law. We need to capture the stories of our clients and use them effectively to sway decision makers and affect public policy.

We learned a great deal through the theme meeting discussions.

The result is our commitment to

- Meeting community needs,
- Working in community collaborations, and
- Making a community impact

Some of the most important lessons we gained from these discussions fall under three broad themes: community needs, community collaboration, and community impact.

Meeting community needs requires us to respond to the whole client. This approach requires engaging in cross-over work – beyond specialty areas – and developing a multidisciplinary expertise. Above all it requires constant learning.

Collaborating with communities means providing leadership in a community of advocates, ensuring a two-way sharing of information, being affirmative and active, and being clear and effective in our communication.

Finally having community impact means going beyond providing access to effecting systemic change. It means going beyond providing individual help to strengthening communities. It means going from simply closing cases to achieving favorable outcomes.

PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE

As a result of the theme meetings with outside experts, Legal Aid staff developed a series of proposals intended to make significant changes in the work of the organization. The proposals were adopted in September 2000 and affirmed in November 2000. The proposals outlined below do not reflect the full range of LAFLA's practice, but rather focus on what we seek to change and improve.

Proposal 1: Internal Collaboration and Communication

LAFLA is a firm of over 120 staff operating out of seven (7) offices across Los Angeles County. Client services are delivered through a complex system involving substantive law units, community offices and outreach projects. Maintaining good internal communication is both a necessity and a challenge. Current information on services needs to be shared firm-wide and emerging issues need to be understood by all relevant advocates. Understanding this, staff has repeatedly identified as a priority the need to develop and maintain mechanisms to facilitate internal communication.

Clients don't live their lives or confront legal issues in terms that neatly fit into one of our specialty areas. An immigration advocate can work with clients having employment, government benefits, and family law problems simultaneously. The housing advocate may fashion a remedy that requires a community economic development perspective, or the resources and input of a consumer advocate. The need to identify and address cross-over issues requires that we work as a well informed team to address long standing and emerging issues faced by our client populations. We are committed to communicating effectively with one another and to knowing the full range of services that we provide.

Goals

- ✓ Ensure that all staff are aware of all work being done by LAFLA.
- ✓ Facilitate coordination on issues that cut across LAFLA unit boundaries.
- ✓ Identify areas of need and issues of importance for our clients.
- ✓ Ensure, by taking a collaborative approach, that we will be as effective as possible in improving the lives of our clients.

Strategies

- ✓ Create client-centered intake system:

- Develop easy to use checklist to assist in issue spotting across unit lines,
 - Share unit intake procedures and protocols, and
 - Revamp telephone system to facilitate client access to services.
- ✓ Develop LAFLA task forces to focus on cross-unit issues beginning with:
 - Child care,
 - Child support,
 - Job development (existing) (focus on welfare to work and local hiring enforcement), and
 - Discrimination.
 - ✓ Strengthen internal communication & staff competency through:
 - Regular advocacy reports,
 - Improved use of technology to facilitate internal communication,
 - Regular meetings of receptionists and screeners to discuss what kinds of legal requests we are getting, what new services or projects the firm is working on, any changes in service that have occurred, and procedural issues regarding internal referrals, and
 - Train all staff in basics of all LAFLA substantive areas.

Status of Implementation

Units have submitted protocols and checklists. As of 1/29/01 receptionists and screeners have begun their schedule of regular meetings and will begin by comparing and sharing resource and referral lists and pro per and handout materials. Task forces have been formed and have either met or will conduct their first meeting at the 2/23/2001 All Staff meeting. A detailed report on the Voice Mail system is awaiting management review.

We learned we need to strengthen both internal and external collaboration.

We need to communicate better among ourselves – share information and engage in crossover projects.

We also need to expand and strengthen our work with a community of advocates.

Proposal 2: Community Collaboration

LAFLA advocacy takes place as part of a network of advocates: client advocates, community based organizations, social service and governmental agencies, legal service providers. This is particularly important in teaching clients to participate in protecting and asserting their own rights. Experts spoke of the daily battle with and sometimes surrender to the normalization of human and civil rights violations which poor people in Los Angeles experience. The forms of these violations are varied from disrespectful treatment from a DPSS worker, to school suspensions, from unpaid wages, to police harassment. Well thought out collaborations with community organizations and results-oriented community education are two strategies for addressing these concerns.

Goals

- ✓ Address policies that have a negative impact on our client population.
- ✓ Give clients the tools to improve their lives.
- ✓ Combat the “normalization” of human and civil rights violations and the criminalization of youth.
- ✓ Develop partnerships with community organizations.

- ✓ Ensure that these organizations have the capacity to identify policies, patterns and practices that require affirmative litigation or legislative advocacy.
- ✓ Maximize effective use of LAFLA resources.

Strategies

- ✓ Launch community outreach pilot project. Develop partnerships with CBOs and institutions to provide effective, measurable community education. Create three (3) teams of lay advocates to assess, refer, and/or handle simple legal problems of:
 - Public housing development/association,
 - Labor union or organization, and
 - Local public school(s).
- ✓ Outreach to low-income communities will be further developed by each substantive law unit and incorporated into their respective workplans.

Status of Implementation

Initial outreach teams have been formed. The labor team has met. The housing and school teams will meet on 2/23/2001. Discussions with two prospective schools have been initiated.

Proposal 3: Youth in Schools

This pilot project is a part of the Community and Collaboration proposal, which has 3 multi-disciplinary teams. Though LAFLA has not had an active Education Unit since the 1994 LSC cutbacks, developing our capacity to address education issues was given considerable attention in our theme discussions. Due to limited resources, we decided to explore the possibility of raising additional resources before committing to significant new work. However, we also decided that advocates should examine the role and focus our education work could take should funding be secured. At the same time, the importance of devoting focused resources to what is happening to youth, and, particularly in the school setting, resulted in a commitment to develop a project or curriculum addressing the following goals.

Goals

- ✓ Combat the criminalization of youth.
- ✓ Impact institutions and policies that systemically negatively affect youth.
- ✓ Empower youth and parents to improve their lives.
- ✓ Combat the normalization of violations of human and civil rights.
- ✓ Strengthen bonds with effective youth-oriented CBOs that benefit our clients.
- ✓ Build focused partnerships with community organizations.

Strategies

- ✓ Train staff to provide legal education to youth and their communities, and assign staff to do outreach that maximizes LAFLA's resources.
- ✓ Implement targeted initiatives that result in measurable outcomes.
- ✓ Create an on-going LAFLA outreach team.
- ✓ Partner with youth oriented CBOs to create a campaign combating the criminalization of youth.

- ✓ Dedicate a part of the Communications Director position to developing and facilitating relationships with the community in furtherance of the above stated goals.
- ✓ Develop a pilot project to outreach to school(s) and provide structured program addressing youth and parent education regarding legal and civil rights and empowerment/self advocacy.
- ✓ Determine what LAFLA's role in addressing issues impacting our youth and the crisis in the school system should be, including considering education law practice.

Status of Implementation

A proposed school outreach team has been formed and will meet on 2/23/2001. Two middle schools in South Central Los Angeles have invited us into their schools. A preliminary proposal for developing a pilot project and curriculum has been made to the two schools.

Proposal 4: Community Education and Information

The firm needs to use the media effectively to broaden the scope of community education and information regarding legal rights, issues, and resources. Effective use of the media helps promote our name recognition, reputation, and ability to fundraise. Moreover, time after time experts urged us to find forums and methods for telling our clients' stories in a way that influences policy makers.

Goals

- ✓ Provide widespread information regarding the law and how to access services.
- ✓ Prevent legal problems.
- ✓ Educate clients re: basic rights and laws.
- ✓ Improve LAFLA name recognition.

Strategies

- ✓ Initiate joint projects with other legal services providers.
- ✓ Contact radio/TV/print media.
- ✓ Identify funding and technical assistance.
- ✓ Request market development committee lead the public relations aspects of proposal.
- ✓ Incorporate appropriate responsibilities into Communications Director job description.

Status of Implementation

This proposal was adopted in concept, but with an acknowledgement that we needed additional resources in order to coordinate and develop the capacity to do more media outreach. Our new Communications Director and the Marketing Committee will be asked to consider how they can take on the coordination and development of this proposal.

Proposal 5: Broadening & Coordinating our Housing Work

The affordable housing crisis confronting low income Angelenos is immense. There is a widespread need for safe, decent, and sanitary housing. We have always had a commitment to housing advocacy. We must take the lead in advocating for better conditions in the current crisis. Even before this process started, the housing unit was considering the strategies to address this crisis. On two occasions, housing advocates from outside LAFLA met with our housing advocates to share

their priorities and concerns regarding LAFLA's role in housing advocacy in the greater Los Angeles and Long Beach communities.

Goals

- ✓ Maximize the use of LAFLA housing resources to address the crisis in affordable housing by shifting significant resources from eviction defense to other housing work.
- ✓ Attack the crisis in affordable housing with affirmative strategies and strategic use of resources.
- ✓ Improve the organization and coordination of LAFLA-wide housing work.

Strategies

- ✓ Establish separate eviction defense and housing units.
- ✓ Develop workplans for each unit targeting objectives and strategies for addressing range of tenant housing issues including: rent control, slum abatement, and subsidized housing.
- ✓ Redefine eviction defense to work beyond unlawful detainers to legislation, affirmative litigation and policy work involving tenants' rights.
- ✓ Hold monthly collaborative meetings of all LAFLA housing advocates.
- ✓ Increase the capacity of LAFLA housing advocates, agencies, and community organizations to improve housing conditions.

Status of Implementation

The Director of Advocacy will coordinate formation and staffing of the two units. It was decided to shift one attorney and one paralegal advocate to the new housing unit to join the three attorneys and one paralegal currently doing non-eviction defense housing work. Housing advocates will reconvene and evaluate progress and consider the need for additional shifts in staffing in six months.

Proposal 6: Welfare Advocacy

Welfare advocacy is another area where LAFLA has traditionally made a substantial investment of advocacy resources. In a time of rising unemployment, health and welfare benefit programs are essential to the survival of many families and individuals. The launching of welfare-to-work programs brings significant challenges and invites cross collaboration at a level not anticipated a few years ago. The sheer number of programs and individual clients requires hard choices regarding what types of advocacy will be conducted and what range of strategies will be used. The Government Benefit unit took initial steps toward priority setting in 1999 and re-assessed those decisions in the context of the strategic planning process.

Goal

- ✓ Maximize resources for protecting safety, stability, health and economic viability of families through strategic assessment and prioritizing of work.

Strategies

- ✓ Develop intake protocols.
- ✓ Assess and plan level of direct client service, policy work and impact litigation.
- ✓ Continue to develop work in cross-over issues with other advocates.

Status of Implementation

Unit protocols and checklists have been developed. Unit members have assigned themselves to virtually each taskforce and outreach team. The Childcare Taskforce will be convened by the unit's directing attorney. Regular assessment of the balance of direct client service, policy work and impact litigation will take place.

Proposal 7: Family Law Advocacy

Child support, domestic violence, childcare, divorce, child custody, and guardianship issue are critical concerns for low income families and communities. Much of our family law work is driven by the requirements of the grants, which fund this work. However, there is a recognition of the array of cross-over work implicating other advocates and the cross-over impact of policy decisions on employment, income maintenance, and family stability. The focus of the family law proposal is to identify and develop the internal and external collaborations that would enhance our work and to identify and address significant policy issues.

Goal

- ✓ Increase advocates' capacity to identify and address impact and policy issues.

Strategies

- ✓ Continue to assist domestic violence (DV) victims under existing contracts to ensure compliance with the current grant terms.
- ✓ Improve relationship to and reputation with outside social service agencies and DV shelters.
- ✓ Create an interdisciplinary work group to discuss cross-over issues, develop referral protocols, and create better ways of communicating.
- ✓ Convene child support taskforce and participate in childcare and other taskforces.
- ✓ Designate period for all advocates to discuss increasing impact and policy work.

Status of Implementation

The unit's directing attorney has convened the initial interdisciplinary work group. Unit protocols and checklists are to be developed.

Proposal 8: Banking, Financial, and Insurance Services

Low income communities lack adequate banking, financial, and insurance services. In the late 1980's and early 1990's, many low income communities suffered a nearly wholesale abandonment by traditional banks, replaced by cash checking services. This has lead to the development of new industries that exploit and prey upon our clients, such as pay day loans and the subprime/predatory lending industry. Insurance redlining is prevalent. Erosion of the commitment under the Community Reinvestment Act to invest in low-income communities has accompanied the segregation of financial services.

Goals

- ✓ Develop or improve banking and financial services for low income communities.
- ✓ Develop or improve affordable insurance options for homeowners, car dependent workers, and minority businesses.

Strategies

- ✓ Form a working group of LAFLA advocates to address this needs.
- ✓ Research and centralize collected materials.
- ✓ Identify current LAFLA work re: banking, financial and insurance services.
- ✓ Meet with banking advocacy organizations.
- ✓ Identify feasible advocacy projects.

Status of Implementation

Advocates from the Consumer , Community Economic Development, Employment unit and an advocate who has been involved in advocacy and policy work related to electronic benefit transfers have met twice. The working group has begun to collect materials and the working group will be housed in the Consumer Unit.

Proposal 9: Discrimination Taskforce

Our experts repeatedly reminded us that racism and discrimination still permeate the lives of Los Angeles' poor people. Violations of human and civil rights have become the norm in our low income communities. Racism has been systemic throughout our nation's history. Today, racism and discrimination are manifested through disrespectful treatment, neglect, and the deliberate targeting of individuals and communities of color by many governmental and institutional actors. These daily abuses are so pervasive that many in society have accepted police abuse, inferior educational opportunities, poor and unequal transportation resources, bad housing, lack of parks and open space, low paying jobs, and the dearth of banks and financial services as just the way things are. We are committed to making the fight against racism and discrimination part of consciousness and our mission.

Goals

- ✓ Promote equal justice and equal opportunity.
- ✓ Combat the normalization of violations of human and civil rights.

Strategies

- ✓ Form a LAFLA multi-disciplinary taskforce.
- ✓ Study the feasibility of addressing discrimination in housing, banking, insurance, and financial services, education, employment, transportation, and the distribution of resources.
- ✓ Develop a plan for addressing discrimination in the areas articulated above.
- ✓ Add "Combating Discrimination" to the LAFLA Mission.

Status of Implementation

The initial team has been identified and will conduct its first meeting on 2/23/2001.

CONCLUSION

Our strategic planning process is about making changes and improving our work. But the process of making changes does not end with this plan. It is an ongoing endeavor requiring a commitment by all involved to monitor, review, assess, and change again.

We believe our strategic planning process has and will continue to energize the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles and assist us in fulfilling our mission to being the frontline law firm for low-income people in Los Angeles.

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